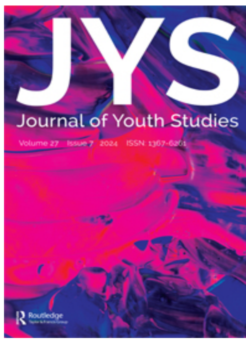

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'Shove that. There's always hope': young people's lived experience of child criminal exploitation

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ABSTRACT

Criminally exploited young people are often found with tangible evidence of criminality, challenging traditional notions of the victim offender dichotomy. This paper presents criminally exploited young people's narratives regarding their lived experiences in Wales. It offers a nuanced perspective of victimhood by drawing on their personal accounts of how they were offered a false sense of hope by individuals who manipulated their unmet needs and limited resources to garner their trust. Young people appeared resigned to exploitative relationships and violence because of their powerlessness and lack of opportunities but rationalised their involvement rather than acknowledging themselves as victims.

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Exploitation; child criminal exploitation; young people; adolescents; victimhood

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, drug supply in the UK has moved away from a 'local drugs for local people' model (Harding 2020, 40) to more fluid, evolving business operations run by hierarchical networks. While those at the top of these operations get rich, their wealth is often accumulated through the criminal exploitation of children and young people (Spicer 2018). Defined as manipulation or coercion based on an imbalance of power, young people under the age of 18 are criminally exploited in exchange for something they want or the prevention of something negative, such as violence to themselves or their family members (Home Office 2018a; Manchester Local Safeguarding Board 2018). In the 2022 annual Child in Need Census return in England, child criminal exploitation was identified as a factor in just over ten thousand referrals to social care services (Department for Education 2022). Although the actual number is likely to be much higher as these figures reflect those known to services and these newer drug dealing business operations are often underpinned by the targeted grooming of vulnerable young people. This has led to increasing awareness of the risk factors that make some young people more susceptible to being criminally exploited. This includes young people who have enduring vulnerabilities such as physical and

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mental health problems or being looked after as well as those who are experiencing more transient vulnerabilities such as parental separation or school transitions (Children's Commissioner 2019; Maxwell and Wallace 2021; National Crime Agency 2017).

Young people may be approached by their peers either online or in person and are often unaware they are being exploited. Instead, they believe they have exercised agency and sought out a solution to their financial hardship or their unfulfilled need for a sense of belonging (Ellis 2018; Moyle 2019). Once targeted, young people's compliance is often acquired through violence (Home Office 2018b). This posits a complex picture where young people's apparent agency turns sour. As exploitation increases, the line between perpetrator and victim becomes increasingly blurred (Coliandris 2015). This has proven challenging for professionals who have experienced difficulties in identifying criminally exploited victims as opposed to labelling them as perpetrators adopting a criminal lifestyle (The Children's Society 2018; Violence and Vulnerability Unit 2018). This has led to professional decision making regarding whether a young person has been 'exploited enough' (Yea 2015) to warrant the deserving victim status. This paper presents young people's voices regarding their lived experiences of criminal exploitation. It offers a nuanced perspective on traditional notions of victimhood by drawing on young people's personal accounts of how they were offered a false sense of hope by individuals who manipulated their unmet needs and limited resources to garner their trust.

1.1. Background

Perhaps the most well-known of the illicit drug business operations is the commuting model of county lines which is predicated on the widespread, systematic criminal exploitation of children and young people (Windle, Moyle, and Coomber 2020). County lines exploitation is where drugs are transported and sold by young people who are trafficked out of cities into rural, coastal and border towns (Coomber and Moyle 2018). As services have become more adept at identifying trafficked young people, these operations have been adapted to evade detection (National Crime Agency 2017). Rather than uniform adaptations, these evolving operations manifest differently according to each geographical area (Harding 2020). For example, in Wales some areas have been infiltrated by urban-based operations (county lines), some areas have adopted hybrid models run by existing local criminal groups (termed 'blurred lines') while in other areas, local families or individuals have adopted elements of the county lines model (Cullen et al. 2020; Maxwell and Wallace 2021). Rather than trafficking young people from cities to towns and villages, the blurred and traditional operations target local young people, trafficking them within and between areas (Harding 2020).

What these operations have in common, is they are controlled by networks and operationalised through the criminal exploitation of young people. Generally, these networks consist of three levels, organised by age (Coomber and Moyle 2018; Densley 2014). At the higher level, the 'top boys' tend to be aged from mid to late twenties and are responsible for decision making and managing the 'deal line' (Coomber and Moyle 2018; Densley 2014). This line is the gangs brand and is often known by the name of someone higher in the network. There are an estimated 1000 lines branded to drug networks and a further 2000 individual lines in the UK, with each individual line making £800,000 profit per year (National Crime Agency 2019). It is perhaps not surprising that the deal line is

closely protected, remaining with the top boys. At the next level of the supply hierarchy, the 'sitters' aged from 17 to 24 years. The sitters live in the host area and are responsible for managing distribution and generating sales based on instructions from the top boys (Coomber and Moyle 2018; Densley 2014). Finally, at the lower level are 'runners' who tend to be aged from 13 upwards.

Runners are used to transport large amounts of money, drugs and weapons across and between areas. They may also be used to perform other tasks such as cutting and bagging drugs, collecting debts and taking over or 'cuckooing' premises (National Crime Agency 2019). Runners are crucial for these operations as they transport drugs across areas and undertake street-level sales (Spicer 2018). Put simply, they is a cheap, dispensable workforce who are used to protect the higher levels of the supply hierarchy from detection. Yet for young people, becoming a runner:

> gives them somebody to be, it is recognition; being a drug dealer is to be a somebody, then they look at what's happening to the older guys driving around in a Mercedes and they think I'll have some of that. Of course, they're being exploited (Prof John Pitts, personal communication).

Young people often trust, respect and wish to emulate these older peers or adults. This renders them unaware or unwilling to accept that their 'role models' use overt coercion or subtle forms of manipulation to threaten, force or persuade them into become runners or committing any form of crime (Sturrock and Holmes 2015). Once exploited, young people's compliance and silence is maintained through 'chilling levels of violence' (Children's Commissioner 2019, 6) where young people may be 'taxed' (injured or marked as a lesson to others), subjected to sexual assaults and sexual exploitation or attacked by their customers or rival groups (National Crime Agency 2017; Robinson, McLean, and Densley 2019). Young people may also be exploited into becoming the perpetrators of violence towards others and grooming other young people into committing criminal activities (Maxwell and Wallace 2021).

For professionals, child criminal exploitation encapsulates longstanding tension between care and control. Young people are often found with tangible proof of criminal activity such as weapons, money or explicit evidence they are engaged in 'the sale of the most demonised of drugs' (Windle, Moyle, and Coomber 2020, 22). This challenges traditional notions of vulnerability and victimhood that are based on narrowly defined depictions of 'victims' as blameless, respectable members of society previously unknown to the offender (Duggan 2018). Such socially constructed depictions of victimhood are unsuitable for criminally exploited children who often do not self-identify as victims or present their 'suffering' to professionals (Bosma, Mulder, and Pemberton 2018, 38). This has led to the professional tendency to castigate these young people as they are perceived as perpetrators and subjected to adultification irrespective of any pre-existing vulnerabilities or any harm they may have endured while being criminally exploited (Feld 1998; Home Office 2018a). Where professionals adopt an adultification bias (Davis and Marsh 2020), young people are deemed as older than their years and more culpable than their peers. This implies individual agency and informed choice. In contrast, Irwin-Rogers (2019, 607) argues that:

> Far from being a genuinely confident, hardened deviant, Nathan was, at his core, a vulnerable, anxious, and tragically insecure teenager.

The presence of existing vulnerabilities heightens a young person's susceptibility to criminal exploitation yet these same young people are also more likely to be victims of adultification. This includes those who are looked after and those living in deprived communities (Davis and Marsh 2020; Maxwell and Wallace 2021).

Rather than young people who are aspiring to be like their role models, the 'criminal' nature of this form of exploitation has led to the assumption that young people are acting rationally based on the calculation of associated risks and rewards (Cornish and Clarke 2014). By definition, this is underpinned by the belief that young people have access to sufficient information and competence to weigh up the benefits and consequences of this relationship. Moreover, it assumes that the decision is static and enduring, determining who they 'become' as adults (Uprichard 2008). This paper argues that when young people are criminally exploited, they are subjected to false information about the risks and rewards from more powerful peers or adults. In this sense, young people have 'bounded rationality' (Evans 2002) as their agency is socially situated and reflects a complex interplay between their unmet needs, current opportunities, the false hope offered by exploitative older peers or adults and their future goals and aspirations. Viewed through this lens, criminally exploited young people are both victims and offenders. Yet they may not be assigned victim status because they do not conform to traditional notions of victimhood (Blakeburn and Smith 2020). They may display 'bravado' (Blakeburn and Smith 2020), presenting as 'streetwise' (Maxwell and Wallace 2021) and resistant to engagement with professionals (Shaw and Greenhow 2020). Conversely, when young people try to engage with professionals their voices are often overlooked on the grounds that they lack the capacity to understand their lived experiences (Marshall 2023).

Hearing young people's voices has particular significance given the lack of power and control exploitation bestows upon them. Under the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) young people have a right to have their voices heard and to protection from exploitation, trafficking and violence. According to article 39 of the UNCRC they are also entitled to recovery from the trauma of exploitation and support to reclaim their health, dignity and self-respect. Further, the active engagement of young people is one of the central tenets of a Child First approach which guides youth justice approaches in England and Wales (Case and Browning 2021). Young people's narratives are vital to understanding what matters to young people as they 'are a key source of information about their lives' (Munro 2011, 25). Their accounts will enhance understanding of the blurred distinction between victim and perpetrator or care and control.

This paper presents young people's narratives captured as part of a wider study that examined child criminal exploitation in Wales. It is argued that rather than a rational choice of the balance between the risks and rewards of criminality, young people's agency is mediated by exploitative older peers and adults and bounded by their unmet needs, perceived opportunities and future aspirations. In doing so, it offers a nuanced view of child criminal exploitation and victimhood.

2. Method

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with young people, parents and practitioners regarding how young people were criminally exploited and what service

responses were most effective at identifying, engaging and safeguarding them. Data collection was undertaken between February and May 2021. This paper presents findings from 18 young people who were asked questions divided into five broad categories: recruitment, dissolution, service provision, support for young people and future aspirations.

2.1. Recruitment

Several recruitment challenges were encountered. At the environmental level, COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown measures curtailed plans to meet young people to introduce the research and foster engagement. At the local level, the initial plan to engage directly with young people through a specialist service was impeded as service funding ended. Attempts to negotiate similar relationships with other services were hindered by COVID-19 restrictions while professionals established remote provision. Therefore, study methods were amended in three ways. First, young people were recruited remotely through gatekeeper organisations, primarily third-sector organisations and children's services but also education, housing and the police. Second, the study adopted a purposive approach and data collection was extended from young people up to the age of 25 with direct experience of criminal exploitation to include two additional groups: four young people on the cusp of criminal exploitation and three adult males with lived experience of exploitation and having been imprisoned for drug offences. Third, young people were provided with three different ways to participate via two different modes: an in person 'practitioner-led' focus group or semi-structured interview with their nominated worker from an organisation or service they were engaging with, or a 'researcher-led' semi-structured interview either via Microsoft Teams or the telephone. Whilst this measure was aimed at fostering engagement, it was noted that practitioner-led engagement could limit the extent to which young people's voices were heard (Maxwell and Corliss 2024). However, the benefit of this approach was twofold. It overcame young people's fears regarding their anonymity and potential repercussions from exploiters which were heightened due to the lack of researcher visibility. It also enabled practitioners to engage young people at the 'right time' (Urry, Sanders, Munford 2015) when they felt ready and able to talk about their experiences; when young people were sufficiently removed from exploitative relationships so they felt safe and able to reflect on their experiences but not too far removed that participation could undermine their recovery.

Of the 18 young people, seven young people participated in a researcher-led interview, eight engaged in a practitioner-led interview and three participated in a practitioner-led focus group. Regardless of the mode of participation, participants were invited to share as much or as little of their own experiences as they felt comfortable. Researcher-led participation lasted an average of 27 min, ranging from 13 min to 33 min. No details for practitioner-led duration were received.

2.2. Data analysis

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research [author's institution] Ethics Committee. All participants provided

informed consent. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed according to the principles of grounded theory (Strauss 1987) using a coding framework initially devised deductively, based on findings from the literature review. The coding framework was then subject to continuous refinement based on inductive coding from the interview data. Analysis was facilitated by NVivo software version 12. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms and potentially identifying information has been anonymised.

2.3. Sample

Of the eighteen participants, fifteen were under the age of 18. Two were female and 16 were male. Regarding ethnicity, 11 participants were from a white Welsh background. Of the remainder, no distinct categories emerged as participants indicated they were from a range of areas, including Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. One participant was of mixed ethnic background. Fourteen participants had lived experience of criminal exploitation. While not explicitly asked, some participants referred to having criminally exploited other young people.

Of those with direct experience, the sample included three adult males who were purposively targeted following challenges in recruiting participants to the study. These men were over the age of 25 and offered valuable insight into the journey from exploitation to incarceration and transition onto more positive pathways. Finally, four participants were an 'at risk' group who had been referred to a specialist service due to previous contacts with the police for low-level offending, risk of permanent exclusion and the presence of two or more additional risk factors such as parental substance misuse, parental mental health. The at-risk and direct experience groups have been combined to preserve their anonymity.

3. Findings

3.1. Show them the money

Most of the sample had been criminally exploited with the promise of money. As Tyler (aged 16) asserted, 'some people do it for money, or some people do it for show'. Hence, the group was divided between those who did it for the money to meet their basic needs and those who did it to obtain an affluent lifestyle. Exploiters adapted their tactics according to the young person. In some cases, this was based on the need to buy essential items such as food or to pay utility bills. Whilst in other cases, young people wanted to improve their living conditions based on their notions of how 'everyone else' lived:

> All I want is a healthy life, not struggling with money. I don't want much, I just want to live nice, like everyone else (Lewis, aged 16).

This highlighted the impact of structural inequalities on young people's susceptibility to criminal exploitation and their hope for an equitable life. While Nathan (aged 17) described, some young people had been 'roped in and sold a dream'. This dream revealed the strain (Merton 1938) between young people's current resources and their available opportunities to afford the extravagant lifestyles portrayed on social media:

> To be rich, that's what [young people] want. They want to have like, if you see all those rappers they have £50 alcohol, they have a £20,000 Mercedes, they have like a nice, nice

> house and then they're drinking wine, and they have a jacuzzi, that's what they want. That's why they want money (Isaac, aged 17).

Young people wanted to emulate rapper lifestyles but were acutely aware of their lack of financial capital. In doing so, they were bombarded with messages based on what they could *afford* rather than what they could *become* which created a disparity between increased pressure to be successful and the reduction in youth employment opportunities (Brown 2022). Exploiters offered young people the semblance of control over their lives and a pathway away from the deprivation of their childhood towards their hopes for a more financially successful adulthood (Reid 2023).

Against this backdrop, drug dealers emerged as role models as 'they'd show you good clothes and stuff and then they'd basically make you want to be like them' (Oliver, aged 17). Within these narratives was the notion that drug dealing provided an 'easy' way to attain financial capital and dream fulfilment. Not only did they promise a pathway out of poverty, some drug dealers also 'looked out' for young people:

> Some of them [drug dealers], even give the youngsters some money, some little change. So, when they grow up, it's like they have this respect and love for that person. It could be as little as one pound, two pound or five or ten (Jordan, aged 16).

Such behaviours obfuscated the exploitative nature of the relationship. This gave young people agency as they felt they were creating opportunities for themselves, 'I just wanted to get a bit of money. That's why I was wanting to do it' (Adam, aged 15).

The link between drug dealing and making money was reinforced visually in two main ways. First, young people saw drug dealers not much older than themselves in branded clothing with expensive phones and cars. Second, they were presented with pictures of money via social media. These visual images were more powerful than words:

> Normal people … would just talk, talk and talk and talk, but when you're a little kid, it just goes through one ear, and it comes out the other … drug dealers show them. Because drug dealers don't really speak to them saying, "Oh, you can be making money," they just show them the money (Cameron, aged 18).

Presented with these images, whether via social media or in the local communities, most participants had been exploited through peer associations and by 'hanging around with people … from my estate' (Lewis, aged 16).

3.2. Some people are just broken

Whilst the promise of money was the primary vehicle used for criminal exploitation, Rob (aged 25+) highlighted how exploiters used existing vulnerabilities and trauma to control young people. Drawing on his experiences having exploited young people, he stated that exploiters minimise the detrimental effects on the young person:

> With young people, you don't see the harm. You minimise it, don't think about it, it's just about control.

In this sense, it was both the need for money and the presence of underlying needs that made young people vulnerable. For young people who 'don't have a lot of strong families and stuff' (Oliver, aged 17), drug dealers offered them a sense of belonging and being cared for. This included young people who had been the victim of sexual or physical

abuse, those whose parents were substance misusers and young people who had experienced family breakdown:

> People that, their dad has left them, they have bullied them, they got abused, they got bullied, long time ago. Yeah, they won't get like a social worker in their head. The only thing in their head that they care about is money, making money, making money (Isaac, aged 17).

Childhood trauma and the accompanying feelings of helplessness unconsciously influence routes into criminality (Reid 2023). Further, as reflected in Jordan's (aged 16) statement, this trauma could disorient them, changing how they viewed the world:

> Some people are just broken. How can I say it? I don't want to be coming on a spiritual thing but then deep down some of them are just broken … that changes their minds and views and their anger, emotions, it controls it all.

According to this view, young people sought to escape the emotional pain associated with childhood victimhood by seeking ways to establish their power. Drug dealers used this prior trauma to access and coerce young people into manipulative relationships.

In practical terms, parental difficulties or being 'broken' limited or prevented care of their children. Drug dealers capitalised on this and the increased availability of young people who 'end up staying outside too many hours' (Jordan) and manipulated their feelings of being unloved and alone.

In support of Densley (2012), rather than dealers approaching young people, young people were manipulated into approaching the drug dealer for 'work':

> I've got young kids … and they said, "Yeah, I want to be with you." And then it comes to that point, they go, "I need money." Alright. "Can I work for you?" (Jordan, aged 16).

Jordan's narrative alluded to young people wanting 'to be with him' suggesting that rather than a drug dealer preying on vulnerable children, he was 'an older [drug dealer] to my own age group' and looked out for them.

This transition from victim to perpetrator emerged in several narratives. It contrasts with depictions of exploiters as unscrupulous individuals as these young people were themselves victims of exploitation. Rather than a considered choice, young people appeared to drift (Matza 1964) into exploitative relationships due to their unmet needs, which included parental abuse, deprivation and a lack of opportunities to meet their basic need or higher level needs. This supports Evans (2002, 265) assertion that:

> Where they [young people] go depends on the pathways they perceive, choose, stumble across or clear for themselves, the terrain and the elements they encounter.

Indeed, Adam emphasised that young people's routes into exploitation vary as 'every person has got different feelings or how they think about stuff'.

There were, however, two exceptions. A minority of participants had been exploited by their relatives. In one case, the young person had started 'work' for their cousin at 14 years of age while another had been sexually and then criminally exploited. While several young people had been forced into exploitative relationships by strangers who had approached them in the street:

> I was just approached. No apps or nothing. I was on my own and they offered me a phone, a burner. I didn't know them (Jack, aged 14).

3.3. It's just the way it is

Findings revealed a degree of inevitability that vulnerable young people would always be exploited:

> I don't know how, we can't stop it, it's just the way it is, they will always just recruit vulnerable young children (Nathan, aged 17).

As Liam (aged 16) noted, 'if people would have given me advice I probably wouldn't have listened as I was in not in a good place'. This theme emerged across participants either because like Liam, they were not in a good place or because 'I was very naïve at the time. If people gave me advice, I would have just thought that it wouldn't happen to me' (Dylan, aged 15). This relates to the notion of bounded rationality (Evans 2002) as young people's naivety shaped their perceptions and acceptance of the risks involved. For example, Dylan reflected that:

> if I were aware of what would happen to me or if I had the knowledge I have now, I probably would not have started (supplying drugs) in general.

Whilst most participants alluded to having seized this opportunity to improve their lives, many became trapped by their exploiters via debt bondage or the belief that this was the only viable opportunity available to them. For the latter, this was aligned with the perceived lack of opportunities provided by education in three main ways. First, there was a lack of expectation and ambition for some young people:

> All of these petty little jobs that no one would want to apply and study for, they'll just give it to these guys who fail in school … Shove that. There's always hope. There's always an opportunity. It can work or it can go down the other route, the guy could be selling drugs to get you money. It can go both ways (Jordan, aged 16).

Rather than confine young people to poorly paid employment, Jordan argued that there was always hope for those who fail in school but when young people are not provided with more attractive opportunities, they may drift into drug dealing (Matza 1964). It could be argued that exploiters manipulate what Bakkali (2019) calls the 'cruel optimism' of neoliberal individualism which gives rise to a mismatch between the resources available to young people and the resources needed to achieve desirable affluent lifestyles.

The second way that schools may reduce young people's opportunities was through school exclusion. For this group there was an apparent lack of hope, 'They basically kicked me out. And I thought, "Yeah, there's no hope" and I literally felt absolute crap' (Jordan, aged 16). This was reiterated by Megan (aged 17) who noted that she had not been given other options or been told about the impact of permanent exclusion:

> I got kicked out of school. People need to tell them [young people] about the consequences of being kicked out of school … Maybe it would have been helpful if I'd had the option of a break from school, but not leaving forever.

This supports findings that rather than promoting inclusivity, schools can damage young people's dignity and increase the distance between them and the resources they need to improve their lives (Daiute and Fine 2003).

Third, some participants felt that education was unsuitable for their needs as it was tailored towards those who go on to further and higher education rather than those seeking immediate employment. Consequently, participants were not equipped with the experience they needed to gain employment. Hence, several participants identified barbering as their chosen career reflecting both the tendency to offer this vocational course to less academic pupils and because participants perceived it to be an easy way to make money:

> In the barber shop, you can choose your hours. Like, it's not, like if you work a normal job, you get paid per hour but like this is, you get paid, usually £10 or £20 for a haircut. So, if you cut like 10 people's hair, there's £100 there. Like you can £100 in a day, easily. And if you only work five days a week then, if you only work on the weekends, then that's £500 and you still have the weekends (Cameron, aged 18).

Whilst one participant noted that barbering can also serve as a legitimate cover for drug dealing activities, it also highlighted the tension between the desire to earn money and the reality of gaining employment. Legitimate employment options for young people often include zero-hour contracts with minimum pay or below. This created an environment conducive to criminal exploitation as young people are more amenable to the false hope offered by exploiters.

According to Cameron, the only way of preventing criminal exploitation was by offering young people an offer comparable to drug dealers. Yet findings highlighted the paradoxical nature of this offer, young people seldom received the wealth they were promised yet the prospect of earning money enticed them into the exploitative relationship. Hence, the offer of money emerged as a credible method of preventing criminal exploitation, 'If they [parents and other adults] could get us jobs or give us money then there'd be no need to do it [sell drugs]' *(Jack, aged 14)*. These findings reiterated the division between those who wanted money to meet their basic needs, 'like a bed and all that and food and just helping, like, with the house and food and all that, and like bills and stuff (Adam, aged 15) and those who wanted an affluent lifestyle.

3.4. Then there's the violence

Against the backdrop of limited options, drug dealers targeted young people with limited social and financial capital. Such 'constrained choice' has similarly been noted by Moyle (2019) where running is seen as mutually beneficial and superior to other available options. Most participants had a sense of agency perceiving themselves to have chosen the lifestyle from the outset or following their entrapment when they became 'addicted' (Jordan) to making money. This supports Ellis' (2018, 156) ethnographic study of girls in secure care which showed that girls rejected being labelled as vulnerable, preferring to perceive themselves as having the ingenuity to actively seek opportunities that improved their circumstances and promote their independence:

> When I did it, I was able to be independent, which I liked. I could buy food, drink and weed. I never bought clothes or anything like that because my mum would have noticed (Aiden, aged 14).

In practice, this can mask exploitation and vulnerability as participants did not always present as victims but rather, 'they think they're part of the gang, they think they're cool' (Professional interview cited by Maxwell and Wallace 2021). Or, as Cameron (aged

18) asserted, 'Most of them are cocky, so they just walk around like a big man'. Hence, most participants described how drug dealing had become their 'lifestyle':

> I go to him, "I ain't got the money." And one of the dealers said, "Well, you're going to have to work it off" and then from there it carries on. It became a lifestyle then for me. You just become addicted to that lifestyle; making money. I don't know how to say it. Really and truly, young people at that age, you get scared, you take it the wrong way, you see this group of people as, how do I put it, as scary people (Jordan, aged 16).

While ostensibly supporting professional assertions that young people choose the drug dealing lifestyle, Jordan's statement presents a nuanced depiction where he accepted a lifestyle of normalised abuse. This suggests that rather than perceiving himself as a victim, Jordan maintained his masculinity, asserting his control and his continued entrapment as he became 'addicted' to making money (Reid 2023). This perspective was reiterated by several young people. Indeed, it is not limited to young people, adult female drug users in Moyle's study (2019) reported wanting to continue drug running as association with the out-of-town dealers made them feel important and part of something despite being subjected to violence, psychological abuse and coercion into sex work.

Where participants had been targeted by peers in their community it was only after they had been enticed into drug dealing with the promise of easy money and a sense of belonging that most had learnt 'the hard way' (Aiden, aged 13) of the harsh reality of the 'lifestyle':

> Teenagers and adults may be attracted to that lifestyle. They may have trauma at home so the more crazy things are, the better. Dealing amphetamines and ecstasy, guns and knives involved. Fast forward. It may seem glamourous but then there's the violence and people being killed and buried in concrete graves (Rob, aged 25+).

For those who perceived this to be their only option, there was a sense they accepted serious violence as an inevitable consequence. According to Reid (2023, 176) they become trapped in a world where 'victimisation, violence and competition for distinction is normal' as the apparent opportunities and choice they are offered comes with a cost. For Bakkali (2019, 1329) this has led to a generation of:

> marginalised young people who are **dying to live**, laying it all on the line in their struggle for meaningful lives.

This was most apparent for young people who were runners rather than those higher up the chain. Hence, Isaac (aged 17) was unwilling to accept this risk but reported that his 'boys' willingly did:

> My boys, yeah, they say take like, take risks, but I aren't taking no risk. Like basically they know what they're doing, they know what they're going to put themselves into and they still do it.

For participants who alluded to having criminally exploited others, violence was rationalised as necessary in three situations: if they had spoken to the police, if they had fallen into debt or if they are avoiding the people exploiting them:

> Only in these kind of predicaments, where threats to parents would be made or fights, where it's going to be related to either money, drugs or snitching. It's one of these three factors (Jordan, aged 16).

While the use of violence to ensure compliance is by no means new (Pearson and Hobbs 2001), Liam's account portrayed the reality of being in that situation:

> They told me how much I needed to give them. They'd say, you fuck up and you pay for it. If you're dealing weed locally [for a local dealer] and fuck up you might get a slap. But this is different. You fuck up with them [county lines] and I think you're dead (Liam, aged 16).

This had implications for service provision. Police confiscation of drugs placed young people in debt bondage to the people exploiting them because 'if the police took £500-stuff-worth off them, then the young people would have to pay dealers £500' (Cameron, aged 18). Yet young people were unable to confide in professionals due to the risks associated with 'snitching'. These risks were not limited to themselves but also their family members because they have 'to go and explain that they've had the stuff taken off them. That's when it gets nasty' (Rob, aged 25+). Such measures rendered them trapped within the exploitative relationship (Violence and Vulnerability Unit 2018).

4. Discussion

The young people's narratives presented in this paper highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of child criminal exploitation. Rather than a rational choice to embark upon criminality (Cornish and Clarke 2014), it is argued that young people's choices were bounded by a complex interplay between their unmet needs, their wider socio-economic landscape and the resources available for them to escape deprivation. This rendered them vulnerable to older peers or adults who offered them a false sense of hope and belonging. This led to the paradox where young people believed they had exercised agency to improve their lives whilst becoming trapped in a world of victimisation and violence (Reid 2023). In this sense young people retained their sense of hope as there was always an opportunity available to them, even when legitimate avenues were closed.

The inclusion of criminally exploited young people's voices is vital to improve understanding of this complex issue. Young people spoke about their hopes and how they were offered alternative pathways. Understanding their lived experiences and how they interpreted and rationalised their situation provided valuable insight into how they struggled to retain agency over their lives as they became trapped in 'hostage-like' relationships with people they trusted (Stark 2018, 22). Moreover, it highlighted that young people had different circumstances and motivations, ranging from those who wanted to 'live nice' to those who wanted the affluent lifestyles and branded clothing. However, the sample does not purport to be representative of criminally exploited young people. It represents a group of mainly male participants who were willing to share their experiences. As participants were recruited to the wider study through gatekeeper organisations, this may represent the higher number of males engaged with services (Maxwell and Wallace 2021). The wider study, from which this sample is drawn, revealed a gendered approach, where professionals were more likely to associate girls with sexual exploitation and boys with criminal exploitation. This meant that on occasion criminally exploited girls were overlooked despite emerging evidence that the numbers of girls is increasing as the drug dealing businesses adapt their operations to evade detection (Maxwell and Wallace 2021). The sample is also limited as it includes a diverse range of participants, reflecting the views and experiences of those at risk as well as those who have been criminally

exploited. In doing so, the findings captured the views of young people who possessed several of the known risk factors for criminal exploitation alongside the views of those who had been exploited and who had exploited others. Nevertheless, their narratives provide vivid accounts of how their unmet needs and circumstances constrained their options to embark upon positive pathways. In doing so, this paper contributes insight into how young people see their lives and how the discrepancy between their hopes and dreams and their lived realities rendered them vulnerable to criminal exploitation.

Findings demonstrated that young people were not a homogenous group. Nevertheless, their vulnerability emerged as a consequence of their age, as well as the additional enduring or transient vulnerabilities they experienced. Regarding age, where young people have been excluded from school or exercised persistent absenteeism, it has been argued that they remain developmentally immature irrespective of their chronological years (Mental Capacity Act 2005). The study suggested that young people's immaturity or naivety may constrain their capacity to consider the risks associated with criminality and their involvement with older peers or adults who are involved in crime. Moreover, young people who have experienced abuse or other traumatic experiences may seek opportunities to take control over their lives and assert their power. This supports Reid's (2023) finding that prior trauma served as an unconscious influence on involvement in criminality and behaviours.

In addition to unmet needs, the findings highlighted the impact of the wider socio-economic landscape and the resources available to young people. Young people spoke about their limited options, whether through school exclusion or because school had little to offer young people who were less academically able or motivated. The offer of low paid employment was unattractive when compared to the money that could be earned through drug dealing. Indeed, the offer of money emerged as the primary vehicle for young people's exploitation. For some young people, this was based on what Irwin-Rogers (2019) terms the 'toxic trap' with social media amplifying the visibility of drug prohibition, structural inequalities and consumer capitalism. These visual images influenced young people's dreams and desires, raising their aspirations while their lived experience provided scant opportunities for realisation (Rolando et al. 2021). Conversely, for other young people, criminal exploitation enabled them to retain their sense of hope as it provided the opportunity for them to 'live nice' like everyone else. This highlighted the acute financial hardship some young people were experiencing. Considered within Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), many young people and families were struggling to fulfil their basic needs for food and warmth. Exploiter's capitalised on this. Their manipulation was concealed behind the façade of offering young people an alternative vehicle to meet their basic needs and realise their ambitions.

Against the backdrop of unmet needs, deprivation and limited opportunities, exploiters emerged as role models who could offer young people a route towards money and success. This study showed that when young people's needs were unfulfilled in their homes, exploiters provided them with a sense of belonging and the promise of money. Young people looked up these older peers, seeking their approval and striving for a chance to 'work' for them. In doing so, many young people appeared unaware or unwilling to accept they were being used by more powerful others (Maxwell 2023). Once these relationships were established, they were subjected to power, control and entrapment by these people with whom they had trusted.

Findings revealed that even when young people were subjected to serious violence they returned to their 'sitter' (Coomber and Moyle 2018). This may be due to the trauma they experienced due to their exposure to violence, abuse, entrapment, fear, relocation and other forms of exploitation (Laser-Maira, Peach, and Hounmenou 2019). This can lead to further feelings of helplessness which can manifest in an increased desire to assert control. This may explain why young people asserted that they became 'addicted' to making money, as Jordan noted. Nevertheless, young people appeared resigned to these criminally exploitative relationships based on their lack of opportunities and powerlessness (Apland et al. 2017; Smeaton 2009). There was a sense that they developed narratives that rationalised their involvement, opting instead to perceive their own agency rather than acknowledge themselves as victims.

This paper argues that professionals must move away from the overly prescriptive bureaucratic agentic perspectives towards a child's rights approach underpinned by anti-oppressive practice (Parton and Williams 2017). Rather than demonising young people and blaming them for being criminally exploited professionals must look at the young person and their wider context (Daiute and Fine 2003). Young people's rational choice of the risks and rewards of criminality is mediated by exploitative older peers and adults and bounded by their unmet needs, perceived opportunities and hopes for the future. Young people were exploited due to their unmet needs which included financial hardship and unequal access to education and employment opportunities. These unmet needs resulted in strain (Merton 1938) between what young people wanted and what they could become.

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